DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 229 782 CS 207 527

AUTHOR Brogan, Katherine M.; Brogan, James D.
TITLE Yet Another Ethical Problem in Technical Writing.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (13th, Houston, TX, April 15-17, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Engineering Education; *Ethics; Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Plagiarism; Research Reports; *Teacher Role; Technical Education; *Technical Writing; Writing Instruction; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Technical writing scholars have discussed, but not resolved, the ethical problems of ghost authorship (Should the technical editor have a place on the title page?) and multiple authorship (Can nine people really author an eight-page essay?). These ethical questions, however, are trivial when compared with the significantly more grave and widespread problem of plagiarism in technical reports. Since most scientific and engineering reports are published without the protection of copyright, widespread adoption of textual material is appearing with disturbing frequency not only in student papers but also in dissertations and professional reports. Although this borrowing may not be illegal, it surely is unethical and destructive for a profession that increasingly depends on its ability to communicate. The reasons for such casual borrowing are many and complex. One obvious cause is the influx of foreign students into engineering fields. For these students, it is far easier to copy someone else's apparently fluent interpretation than it is to devise their own in halting, cumbersome prose. The problem, however, is not limited to foreign students. Many American engineering students, uncomfortable with writing, are also adopting sections of texts without copyright. Technical writing teachers and engineering faculty should work together to emphasize paraphrasing or summary writing and to stress the importance of clear organization and original writing. Such exercises will help the student discern the difference between a good paraphrase and plagiarism. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED229782

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Yet Another Ethical Problem in Technical Writing

Katherine M. Brogan
James D. Brogan

Technical writing aficionados have discussed, but not resolved, the ethical problems of ghost authorship (should the technical editor have a place on the title page?) and multiple authorship (can nine people really joint author an eight page essay?). These ethical questions, however, are trivial when compared to the significantly more grave problem of plagiarism in technical reports. Unfortunately, while this plagiarism is as morally reprehensible as any other form of stealing, it is frequently tolerated because its source is generally in the public domain. This kind of plagiarism has serious repercussions not only in writing research reports but in the research process as well.

This paper discusses the reasons for the frequent occurrence of this kind of quasi-legal plagiarism, suggests methods to help writers avoid plagiarism in technical areas if they wish to, and finally comments on the ramifications for research if such plagiarism continues.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Katherine M. Brogan
James D. Brogan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 207 527

Yet Another Ethical Problem
in Technical Writing

Technical writing aficionados have discussed, but not resolved, the ethical problems of ghost authorship (should the technical editor have a place on the title page?) and multiple authorship (can nine people really joint author an eight page essay?). These ethical questions, however, are trivial when compared with the significantly more grave problem of plagiarism in technical reports. Unfortunately, while such plagiarism is as morally reprehensible as any other form of stealing, it is frequently tolerated because its source is generally in the public domain. This kind of plagiarism, however, has serious repercussions not only for writing research reports but for the research process itself.

Unfortunately the problem is widespread. In fact not too long ago officials at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) were chagrined when they discovered that the agency's Car Book had been privately published by authors previously employed by them. While irate NHTSA officials could rant about the rank borrowing of their publication, they soon learned that their anger had to be confined to moral outrage. NHTSA had no legal recourse because the original Car Book is in the public domain; consequently, while the new edition is more than indebted to NHTSA, the authors cannot be held legally accountable.

Although the NHTSA case gained national media attention, such widespread casual borrowing is not an anomaly. Since most scientific and engineering reports are published without the protection of

copyright, widespread adoption of textual material (statistics are more generally acknowledged) is appearing with disturbing frequency not only in student papers but in dissertations and professional reports as well. Although this borrowing may not be illegal, it surely is unethical and destructive for a profession that increasingly depends on its ability to communicate.

The reasons for such casual borrowing of text are many and complex; consequently, I shall deal with only a few of them here. One obvious cause is the influx of foreign students into engineering fields, especially at the graduate level where most independent work is done. Current statistics indicate that over 30% of engineering graduate students are foreign students whose first degree is from a foreign university and significantly the percentage increases for foreign students enrolled in doctoral programs. For most of these students, English is not their primary language and writing in it is laborious and time-consuming. For these students, unaccustomed to the structure and nuances of the English language, it is far easier to copy someone else's apparently fluent interpretation than it is to devise their own in halting, cumbersome prose. To compound the problem further, foreign students may have no conception of synthesizing material so that it becomes an integral part of their own knowledge. A typical foreign engineering student may define a term paper as a collection (not an amalgamation) of research on a problem; he may see no necessity to relate the data he has compiled to his body of knowledge, and he may feel no compunction about copying entire sections of research reports. The result is an

all-too-familiar unassimilated hodge-podge. Frequently, such a student cannot provide even the most rudimentary transitions. Other students simply submit other people's reports in-toto. Indeed, a recent dissertation incorporated the report of a public planning agency as one of the chapters. Significantly, there generally is no attempt to 'hide' this flagrant plagiarism, for most students will submit a bibliography with the report and will become outraged when the instructor does not accept it.

The problem, however, is not limited to foreign students. Many American engineering students, uncomfortable with writing, are also adopting sections of texts without copyright. Recently, a dissertation writer simply copied the description of a city under study from the local telephone directory. Disturbingly, the writer felt an obligation neither to describe in his own words nor to credit someone else's description.

Another obvious reason for rampant plagiarism must be placed at the feet of technical writing teachers. As teachers of technical writing, we cannot enforce ethics in writing outside our own classroom; but, we can emphasize the importance of synthesizing the reading of technical material before writing. We must address the intertwining problems of reading and writing by emphasizing paraphrasing and summary writing in our own classes; such excercises will help the student discern the difference between a good paraphrase and plagiarism. Whether the student carries this ethical concern about plagiarism into the world of work is his problem; our problem is to make him aware of potentially serious repercussions of inadequately assimilating data for his own expertise and subsequent career advancement.

In addition to a responsibility to students, we also have a responsibility to our colleagues in the engineering disciplines. If we are fortunate enough to be in a university which requires engineering, business and science students to take writing beyond the freshman year, we will see these students for one course after freshman composition. This simply is not sufficient. Most of the students' writing will be done outside of the course - either for engineering teachers or for supervisors in a work place. Since these readers are not trained as writing teachers, they will generally focus on mistakes in mechanics rather than errors in the writing process, itself. As writing teachers, we must help our colleagues spot plagiarism. To do this, of course, we must have a close working relationship with people in the technical areas; we must be attuned to their needs while recognizing their concern about writing. Perhaps a promising program will be the writing requirements recently instituted by the Civil Engineering department at MIT. This program requires students to take an essay exam determining their writing skills before acceptance into the program. The exam is reviewed by a panel composed of both engineers and writing teachers and the student is either unconditionally accepted or placed in a writing course emphasizing basic skills or organization.

The ramifications of plagiarism in research, while at first appearing minimal, can be rather serious. Plagiarized texts demonstrate that the author either has not or <u>can not</u> assimilate technical material. He has failed the basic steps of reading, understanding, and synthesizing the work of others. How, then, can he possibly apply any basic research to his own and how can he possibly perform original research.

Researchers, especially at the Ph.D. level, who totally depend on the work of others have derivative minds and should be relegated to the role of technicians. Such persons will rarely enter policy-making roles, for they can only reiterate old policy; they cannot make policies of their own. In graduate school, such students may be able to follow the major researcher's directions, but they will be unable to discern their own direction. Significantly, such floundering is often characterized by writing which is sloppily organized and devoid of transitions.

Other ramifications are more pragmatic. If by chance reports are published with unacknowledged sources, when these are discovered the reputations of both the graduate writer and his co-author (the major professor) are tarnished. The career of a junior researcher can be ruined while the creditability of the major professor and frequently his institution suffer irreparable harm.

Solutions and Responsibilities

As an English teacher, I take perverse pleasure, perhaps, at pointing out the writing faults of others. But finger pointing, while allowing for a fleeting sense of superiority is fruitless unless we can give some kind of suggestions to correct the problem. Since I am a pragmatist rather than a theoretician at heart, I will do just that.

In order to be effective, the technical writing teacher must be involved in a technical writing program jointly housed in both English and Engineering departments. Such a program must not be a

misnomer for the single technical writing course required for graduation; rather a good technical writing program must build on a good freshman program and it must actively involve our colleagues from engineering disciplines as well as professionals in industry and government. Our colleagues must be made aware that writing cannot be taught in isolation. Technical writing only introduces technical forms; the polishing of the student's style must take place during the entire engineering curriculum. While we cannot expect engineering instructors to teach writing, we can expect them to emphasize its importance and to prepare students for the real world of work where the engineer must communicate effectively, frequently from an adversary position.

In this perhaps "Candidian" world, the writing professional's primary duty would be to teach writing. His technical writing courses would not be extra courses of secondary interest. Writing teachers involved in this kind of program could insist that foreign students do more than simply pass the TOEFL; they could institute technical writing programs geared for foreign students. They could also give workshops to engineering instructors and professionals to help them spot potential plagiarism and could point out that sudden changes in tone and sentence structure, in word order, and in smoothness may indicate that what the student calls paraphrasing may be wholesale adoption.

In our own technical writing courses, we must emphasize how to write reports that are not plagiarized. We must return to summary writing for literature reviews and instruct students that, while

there are many ways to write summaries, two useful ways are for the technician either to give an historic overview or to concentrate on one aspect of a number of research reports. Literature reviews approached in this way will have less chance of being plagiarized.

This kind of approach accompanied by our engineering colleague's increased emphasis on clear organization and original writing may help convince students of the importance of writing. Technical writing teachers cannot solve this problem alone, neither can engineering instructors; we must work in concert to correct it.